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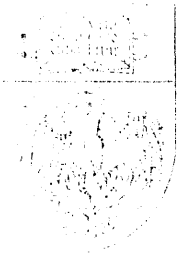

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THE PLACE OF THE CHURCH IN THE WORK OF SOCIAL BETTERMENT

By Edgar P. Hill, D.D.

PHILADELPHIA
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EDGAR P. HILL, D.D.

Professor of Sacred Rhetoric and Applied Christianity in McCormick Theological Seminary; Superintendent of the Church Extension Board, Presbytery of Chicago

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By F. M. Braselmann

The Place of the Church in the Work of Social Betterment

THERE is no more familiar chapter in the history of the race than that which deals with the triumphs of Christianity. Everyone has read again and again how the gospel moved from land to land, subduing savage tribes, bringing heathen peoples under its benignant sway, changing manners and customs, establishing institutions of mercy and inaugurating movements for the uplift of men. These achievements have become the priceless and permanent possession of humanity. The record is a glorious one and the facts are unquestioned. As one reviews the story he finds himself almost instinctively asking for an explanation. How did it all come about? What has been the plan of operation? What is unique and what incidental in the program? In the joy and excitement of victory it is easy to forget how the success was achieved, and what hard, persistent, unromantic toil and sacrifice were involved.

Our inquiry is concerned more particularly with that phase of religious work which deals with the material welfare of men, viewing them for the moment as creatures of time rather

than eternity, whose bodies must be cared for and whose environment must be made wholesome and comfortable. In order, then, that we may enter into the hidings of the power of Christianity as a factor in the work of social uplift, let us recall briefly the plan of its founder and the essential features of the great propaganda.

Jesus announced certain definite principles for the guidance of his followers in extending the kingdom. The plan was not the result of an evolutionary process. It was implicit in the teaching of Jesus from the beginning. The apostolic Church moved along certain prescribed lines. Under the guidance of the Spirit the gospel swept from city to city and from land to land until the banner of the cross floated over the throne of the Cæsars.

CHRISTIANITY AND SOCIAL BETTERMENT

What we call social betterment was not a by-product of the enterprise. It was a chief output. The idea of materially improving the lot of the multitudes is no discovery of our day. This was of the very passion of Jesus, whose intensest concern was always for the poor and sick. By identifying himself with

the hungry and the thirsty and the naked, Jesus laid upon his followers a permanent obligation to care for the needy. In such parables as that of the Good Samaritan he explained the spirit and sweep of the new philanthropy. When he knelt before his disciples one by one in the upper room and washed their feet, when he climbed the heights of Calvary to surrender his life for lost men, he gave to the world its most impressive lesson in the kingliness of ministry and its supreme example of sacrificial service. Thus inspired, the early Church made generous provision for its poor. It had no philanthropic institutions, for the reason that it had not sufficient means to establish, nor the necessary knowledge to use them. However, with the growth of the Church and enlarged experience in providing for the poor, all sorts of philanthropic institutions began to appear. In the fourth century Basil founded, near Cæsarea, a large institution for lepers and strangers. In Antioch, Chrysostom erected a hospital for the sick and an asylum for the poor. All over the Roman Empire, as rapidly as the Church advanced, such institutions made their appearance until so-called "houses for strangers" came to be

almost as much a part of a religious establishment as a cross. All through the centuries it has been the very genius of Christianity to care for the poor, to protect the weak, to demand a social order in which all shall have an equal opportunity and the rights of all shall be safeguarded.

Charles Loring Brace, in his "Gesta Christi," gives us a good idea of the achievements of Christianity in this work of social uplift. He shows how Christianity affected the position of woman, lifting her from servitude to a place of honor and power. He traces the influence of Christ's teachings on slavery, and war, and dueling, the treatment of criminals and intemperance and international relations, proving conclusively that Richter was not indulging in mere rhetoric when he said, "The pierced hand of Jesus has lifted empires off their hinges, turned the stream of centuries out of its channel and still governs the ages." In his scholarly volume, "The Divine Origin of Christianity Indicated by Its Historical Effects," Dr. Storrs moves along much the same lines as those followed by Brace, treating the subject, however, more philosophically. He shows how the new conceptions of God and

man, of man's duty toward God and of man's duty to man, completely revolutionized society, softening antagonisms, leveling inequalities, creating an atmosphere in which old evil institutions could not live, assuring a golden age ahead, when there shall be a new heaven and a new earth, in which righteousness shall be supreme. "As the sun in the heavens turns winter ice to rippling streams, so the gospel of Galilee has certainly to a great extent, throughout the domains which it affects, turned wealth and power into channels of cordial beneficence. It carries to-day into millions of cabins securer liberty, more abundant prosperity, a new aspiration and more animating hope, and while its results are yet confessedly incomplete, awaiting a consummation still to be realized, in each of these already attained lies the prediction of other changes, following the same clear line of direction which shall make the future civilization of the world more lovely and more benign than others or ours thus far has been."

And now Dr. Dennis has given us his monumental work on "Christian Missions and Social Progress," in which he reviews the changes now taking place in foreign lands

wherever the power of the gospel is being felt. Merely to turn rapidly the pages of the two volumes and to look at the pictures is to confront a proof of the social value of Christianity that is almost resistless. Here, Indian devotees, filthy and degraded. Next, Indian Christians, clean and intelligent. Here Chinese priests, mutilated and disgusting. Next, Christian Chinamen, bright faced, well dressed and attractive. Here, naked Africans, superstitious and cruel, crouching before their rude huts. Next, Christian Africans, erecting houses, making wagons, bending over their books. Surely the author offers abundant confirmation of this far-reaching statement: "If civilization in any land or any age is to have the stamp of nobility and the promise of permanence, it must be founded in morality, and the only morality which has stood all the tests of experience and history is essentially Christian." Nor do such reviews as those of Brace and Storrs and Dennis begin to tell the story, for, as Benjamin Kidd puts it, "Christianity has stored society with a great fund of altruism, which is incorporating itself in institutions for social betterment, and stimulating to philanthropic action multitudes of men who

often do not suspect the source of their generous impulses." Thus most of our humane legislation, in which we rightfully boast, has been secured. Thus most of the charitable organizations have had their inception. Thus almost every reform movement may be explained. Thus are to be traced the beginnings of the untiring agitation for better industrial conditions, greater opportunities for the young, a more wholesome environment in which manhood and womanhood may develop.

THE PROGRAM

This brings us face to face with Christianity's program. How has all this been brought about? What is the plan which has resulted in achievements so splendid and makes possible our confident prediction of even better days ahead?

The most conspicuous and the most essential institutional factor in all this world-wide campaign has been the Church—not the ideal Church, without spot or wrinkle, but the real, visible Church, composed of weak, inconsistent, erring men and women; the Church that at times has so sadly misrepresented the spirit of its Master, and more than once has seemed

in danger of extinction; the Church that needs no more exact description than to say it embraces all those local churches in which are the people who profess Christianity.

Just here it will be of interest to note how Paul addresses one of these local organizations —such a one, for example, as the one at Corinth. He says, "Unto the church of God which is at Corinth, even them that are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, . . . I thank my God always concerning you, for the grace of God which was given you in Christ Jesus." And yet this was the Church that was rent with divisions, whose members were bringing reproach upon the name of Christ by reason of their immorality and were turning that sacred supper, commemorative of the Lord's death, into an occasion for revelry and strife. A modern church critic could certainly find abundant material for an interesting article by investigating the membership of the church at Corinth. But through just such agencies has the mighty work of social amelioration been carried on through the centuries. Through these channels has God poured the floods of his grace upon the parched deserts of society. Without the Church it is incon-

ceivable that Christianity could have been spread abroad through the nations. Standing in the churches the prophets of the Almighty have heralded the messages of Christianity and have urged the principles of that kingdom which is to include all the kingdoms of the earth.

The people of the churches dedicated to the service of Jesus Christ are the people who have gone forth in the name of their great Leader to fight the battles against entrenched wrong, to minister to the needs of men and to labor for the day of universal brotherhood. To applaud Christianity as the chief explanation of the progress of the race, and in the next breath to denounce the Church as an impertinence is like rejoicing in education and then denouncing schools of learning that have made education possible, or praising national life and then denouncing the idea of government, without which a nation could not exist.

The Church has accomplished its work of social redemption by moving along three lines:

First: Assuming that the best service to be rendered society is the making of good men, its chief business has been to select men one by one, to seek to work upon them the Lord's

miracle of grace, whereby a heart of pride and selfishness is transformed into a heart of humility and love, and then to equip these trophies of its power for lives of patient, persistent usefulness. Thus it seized upon an Augustine, sensual and unhappy, and made of him a man of holiness and power and joy. Thus it found a Jerry McAuley, penniless and besotted, and changed him into a man of purity and overflowing charity. Thus it claimed and trained a William Booth to rally an army for the reclamation of the world's thieves and harlots and drunkards. Thus it has laid its hands on multitudes in every age and generation, led them into the presence of Him who has spoken peace to their troubled souls and then sent them forth to become blessings to humanity. Just here the method of the Church comes into sharp conflict with that of the secular movements of to-day. With a strange unconcern for history or common sense, it is being confidently asserted that the only obstacle in the way of all people becoming good is the unequal distribution of property. Listen to one of the leading sociologists of the day: "Sin is misery. Misery is poverty. The antidote of poverty is income." Hear this from a recent

book: "We must believe, in the light of the new social philosophy of our time, that human nature is good and not bad. We must declare with the Chinese philosopher Mencius that 'man's nature to do good is like the tendency of water to flow downward.' Man's sin, like his disease and his poverty, is to be attributed primarily to the social and economic conditions of his environment." In the face of which we say, with much confidence, that it will take more than the word of a sociologist to convince the ordinary father that the chief thing to insure the development of a boy into an angel is nothing more serious than relief from financial embarrassment. Jesus said, "Ye must be born anew," and he explained how the miracle was to be performed. It has been the chief business of the Church to bring this thing about. When, therefore, Professor Rauschenbusch, in discussing the social problems of the day, insists that the greatest contribution any man can make to their solution is a regenerated personality, we come upon an impressive confirmation of the unique value of the Church in the work of social betterment.

The second phase of the ministry of the Church in social work is the training of men

for the task. It is an easy thing for the sociological investigator to gather facts, tabulate figures, and then bewilder people by confronting them with the enormous problems to be solved. The historian's task of recording what has been accomplished by men of consecration is not especially difficult. But the actual doing of the work is the significant thing. Where are the people to be found who will fling themselves with holy abandon into the task of uplifting the fallen and degraded? How is love for humanity to be implanted in human hearts? How are young men and women to be persuaded to turn from paths of ease and fame and seek the lowly places of service? What are the motives and whence the inspiration sufficient to send workers down into the slums to lift burdens from weak shoulders, to fight the battle of the poor and to love the unlovely? It has been the peculiar task of the Church to supply the forces for doing this work of social uplift. Its special business has been to make Jesus Christ known to men. It has told again and again the story of Jesus and his love, how he went about doing good, how he taught his disciples to feed the hungry, clothe the naked and visit the sick,

and how at last he laid down his life to save a lost world. It has scorned with James that hollow religious profession that says to the poor, "Be ye warmed and filled" and yet does not give them the things needful to the body. It has flung back the curtain that hides the unseen world and with the heavenly glories in view has called to exhausted and discouraged workers, "Be ye stedfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labor is not vain in the Lord." Thus the Church has been supplying recruits for the ever-increasing army of social workers, who with warm hearts, in unstudied ways, in obscure places, without thought of the world's applause, have sought earnestly to bear the burdens of the weak. It need occasion no surprise, therefore, when Rev. Charles Stelzle, after making a personal investigation of the philanthropies of New York City, tells us that he found practically all the workers were church members. It might have been expected when a question was sent to a thousand leaders in philanthropic effort that eighty-eight per cent would respond that they were connected with churches. It is an impressive, though tardy, testimony that comes through

Anson Phelps Stokes from a prominent London settlement worker—himself an agnostic, "The more I go on the more I realize that it is the men of Christian faith upon whom I must rely for my helpers." Very significant was the statement that appeared recently on the editorial page of the leading charity magazine of this country, to the effect that the philanthropies of America must continue to look to the churches not only for financial support but for men and women to do the work.

The third contribution of the Church to the work of social betterment has been the unceasing proclamation of the principles of the kingdom of God, which have gradually been given a place in the affairs of men. These principles are the one corrective of the social ills that torment the race, the universal recognition of which will usher in the day so long ago promised when the whole world shall be brought together into a happy, prosperous, righteous brotherhood. Just here it should be said that the most powerful influences exerted by the Church in social affairs, almost as a rule, have not been brought to bear directly but through intermediary agencies. The Church, as such, has not addressed itself

to such tasks as the overthrow of slavery or the liquor traffic or the introduction of a new industrial order for the simple reason that its legitimate business is not that of a reform organization. Whenever it has tried to deal with institutions, almost invariably it has become bewildered and failed. Whenever it has urged the principles of the kingdom it has always spoken with authority and power. Carlyle spoke as a prophet, and consciences were mightily stirred, when he called men from their muckraking to the consideration of such high themes as God and duty and destiny. But when this prophet began to discuss economic schemes he made himself absurd. Ruskin addressed his countrymen with almost apostolic power when he pleaded for justice and insisted that life is the only real "wealth"; but when he endeavored to apply his teachings by suggesting a definite industrial system, he brought upon himself the ridicule of thoughtful men. The task of the Church is not to champion reform movements, but to announce principles which shall bring about reforms. Its work is not to sit in judgment on schemes for the reconstruction of society, but to make God real to men and to

insist that in any social reconstruction the divine will shall be the determining factor. The preacher's chief business is not to direct classes and clubs nor to act as a sociological expert for his congregation, but to conduct men into the radiant presence of Christ, there to learn his secrets, thence to return to the world to study the slum, to fight the social evil, to minister to children. The social settlement has its task and its reward. The Church also has its mission and its peculiar joy. As Shailer Mathews puts it: "The Church is a training school to teach the art of social service. It furnishes the material for any rational social movement. Its central duty is to throw into an irreligious but generous age a host of sons and daughters filled with the fraternal enthusiasm of its Founder."

READJUSTMENTS

Thus the Church has been engaged in the work of social amelioration. That it has been effective, every fresh review of its achievements makes increasingly evident. That the essential features of its program should be maintained, a study of its resistless ongoing conclusively demands. That the details of its

ministry should remain the same from age to age, no thoughtful man would contend for a moment. The fact is, a new situation confronts the Church at this hour, and the social spirit must express itself in new ways. For example, we have come to realize as never before how large a factor environment is in the making and unmaking of character. We recognize the importance of studying with scientific accuracy the conditions that make and unmake men. The Church has been interesting itself largely in methods of relief, by conducting hospitals and asylums. We are now learning that men need help at other times than when afflicted with bodily ills. Poverty with all its attendant evils is largely a result of social maladjustment. The poor are being oppressed as in the days of Isaiah and Amos. How shortsighted, then, the policy that would take offerings to relieve the poor and have no word concerning the business methods and the commercial spirit that are in large measure responsible for the existence of the poverty! And we have discovered that the principles of the kingdom have a sweep hardly suspected before. They are to be applied to all the affairs of men, to business, to government, to international

relations, until all the kingdoms of the world have become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ. Because of these wider applications of gospel principles and of the huge problems which Christianity itself has largely created, the Church is confronted with tasks so bewilderingly great that men are wondering if it is really sufficient to meet them successfully. Yet when the last word has been said in emphasizing the novelties and complexities of our modern life, the fact remains that in its essential features its program does not differ from other days. Fundamentally our problems are those which every generation has had to meet. Selfishness is the chief source of all our troubles, as it always has been. We value sheep above men, just as in the days of Jesus. It is being assumed to-day, as it was long ago, that a man's life does consist in the abundance of the things he possesses.

Here we get close to the heart of every social problem, call it slavery, or capital and labor, or the slum. It is because men's hearts are unresponsive to the things of the Spirit that corruption flourishes and sensuality prevails. Men are not eternalizing themselves; therefore the weak are oppressed and children

are being neglected. The multitudes do not have God in their hearts; here is the explanation of social sins and industrial maladjustment. All of which leads to the inevitable conclusion that the larger outlines of the program of Christianity are as unchanging as the movement of the stars, for the eternal God is back of them both. The Church is still the divinely appointed agency through which the kingdom of God is to be spread abroad. Individual men must still be led one by one to the foot of the cross, there to find forgiveness and peace and power; for, however much we may have become impressed with what the sociologists call social sins, we know very well that in the last analysis sin and repentance are very personal matters that bring the soul alone into the presence of its Maker. The necessary training for service must be given in the one classroom where Jesus is the teacher and the cross is made the symbol of sacrificial love. Never before has it seemed so evident that the kingdom of God is the ideal social order toward which we are moving, and that as we urge the principles of that kingdom all antagonisms disappear and our vexatious social problems find their solution

FACING THE PROBLEMS

In the light of these considerations, what shall be said of the criticisms so persistently brought against the Church for its lamentable inefficiency as a factor in our modern life? It is charged that the churches are indifferent to the social needs of the day and that most of the valuable philanthropies are under secular oversight. Men are explaining their absence from places of worship on the ground that more real religious work is being done outside the churches than in them. Even religious leaders speak apologetically of themselves and the interests they represent, readily acknowledging the practical insolvency of organized Christianity in the presence of the gigantic evils of the day. What are the facts? The facts are that benevolent and reform work throughout the civilized world is traceable almost wholly to the open doors of the houses of worship.

It is the preaching of the gospel that has been at work in the world transforming the lives of men, training the multitudes to go forth in unselfish service, charging souls with such principles as equality and fraternity and liberty, in the presence of which evil institutions

cannot survive and helpful ministries are sure to prosper.

Some churches are failing miserably. We confess it with shame. But why? Some fail because of formalism and slavish devotion to words; some because they have not caught the vision of social needs or entered into the meaning and joy of service; others (and the number has become alarmingly large) because they are making the serious blunder of thinking they are doing more good when teaching a group of boys how to play ball than when explaining to them the way of Jesus; that they are rendering a more valuable service to society when they give a man a cup of coffee and a bun than when they lead him in penitence to the foot of the cross.

Has this discussion any bearing on the challenge now being made that the Church must assume leadership in certain great reforms or acknowledge that its days of usefulness have come to an end? Let us see. Here comes one of the most honored social workers in America, with the righteous indignation of a prophetess proclaiming a crusade against the social evil. With awful fidelity she depicts the horrible situation. Then she hastens to insist that the

Church is the one agency to destroy this monster; that it must proceed forthwith to engage in battle. Yes, but how? Shall the official boards of our churches at once resolve themselves into law and order leagues, endeavor to raise a huge sum of money, employ detectives, engage lawyers, and thus begin the war on extermination? It is comparatively easy to describe an evil and lay upon the Church the responsibility of destroying it. It is quite another thing to indicate with definiteness the method of procedure.

Here are the arousing voices of our generation explaining with powerful impressiveness the struggle of the common people to obtain their industrial rights, likening the rise of socialism to the revolt of the children of Israel against their Egyptian oppressors. They insist that it is the task of the Church to assume the leadership in this uprising of the masses, to end this long and bitter strife or to confess its inability to solve the most serious problem of the new century. Yes, but how? From henceforth shall the preachers close their Bibles and give themselves to the study of economics? Shall our prayer meetings be turned into conferences on socialism? Shall

the children of our Sunday schools be instructed in the writings of Marx and Bebel and LaSalle instead of the teachings of Isaiah and Paul and Jesus? At least some hint should be given of the way in which the desired result is to be attained.

Here is the Men and Religion Movement interesting the country from ocean to ocean in the work of social service. Sociological surveys have been made of the larger cities. Such topics as sanitation, tenement houses, the white plague, child labor, have been earnestly discussed. The churches have been severely arraigned for their indifference to such practical matters. The burden has been laid upon them of providing an environment in which the masses may find it less difficult to develop into healthy, intelligent, God-fearing men and women. But we insist on inquiring again: How is this work to be done? Instead of meeting for worship on Sunday morning shall we come together to listen to lectures on these various social topics? Shall we transform church edifices into gymnasiums and cooking schools and kindergartens? We are wondering if it is quite fair for men first to declaim against the inefficiency of the churches, then lay upon

them the correction of gigantic evils, which the rest have given up in despair, and then calmly move off without offering even a suggestion as to how the work shall proceed.

The Church is sufficient for the problems of the new age, as it has been for the needs of every generation from the beginning of its history. Its program will differ in no essential particulars from that of the past. Its houses of worship will not be given over to the games of youth, nor to the feeding of the poor, nor the healing of the sick. As of old, men and women will enter the sanctuary with softened footfall and awed anticipations to commune with God, and find strength for the hard journey of life. The preacher will not leave his pulpit to engage in the work of cleaning up alleys and teaching boys how to swim, under the mistaken notion that ministering to bodies is a more practical and necessary service than ministering to souls. As in other days, the man of God will enter his pulpit with a heavenly light upon his face to remind his hearers that they have souls as well as bodies; that Christ is able to save to the uttermost all who turn unto God through him, and that heaven is just beyond. Churches will not resolve

themselves into organizations for fighting vice and crime or for proclaiming any special economic doctrine. But, as heretofore, the loyal followers of the Lord Jesus, having talked with their God in his sanctuary, will go back into the world to do his will as Christian merchants and lawyers and teachers and editors and statesmen. Each in his way will do the Lord's work in schoolroom and on the public platform and through the printed page. Drawn together by a common purpose they will organize groups to heal the sick, care for the poor and protect the weak. Arraying themselves as for war, they will fight the battles of the Lord at the polls, in the courts of justice and in legislative halls.

How much has been accomplished! How much is being done! How much remains to be performed! There never was a day in the history of Christianity when the Church was engaged in a more beneficent and far-reaching ministry than to-day; never a time when it was more needed than just now. This is no time for apologizing or temporizing, but for purposeful, aggressive, enthusiastic action.

We, the children of the Church, should rejoice in our responsibilities and privileges.

Those of us to whom God has intrusted the means should see to it that our churches are well equipped for their work, that our charitable and educational institutions are properly supported and our missionary enterprises generously sustained. Especially should we, who have been called into the gospel ministry, give ourselves in complete devotion to our peculiar task of explaining God's will as revealed in his holy Word, of pointing lost men to the way of salvation through Jesus Christ and of proclaiming the coming of God's kingdom, which always brings righteousness and peace and love.

The Church is no spent force. It is the Church of the living God. Its glorious past is but an earnest of what is to be. However much its visible forms may be modified, its essential life and ministry will not change, except to grow stronger and richer with every passing year until the vision of the Seer of Patmos shall be fulfilled. Let us, who call ourselves Christians, seek ever closer fellowship with our Master and then go forth with confidence and joy to exemplify the spirit of Him who announced it as his mission on earth to preach the gospel to the poor, to heal

the broken-hearted, to preach deliverance to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, to preach the acceptable year of the Lord.

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